

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

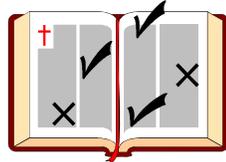
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## Reading the Bible selectively

Rereading the Christmas story in the gospel of Luke last month reminded me of how selective many of us are when we read the Bible. We remember and quote verses that seem to confirm what we're comfortable with, and we ignore those that tell us things we'd rather not know or urge us to do things we'd rather not do.



A lot of what we choose to ignore is about economic issues. I was reminded of that recently by rereading the section of the Christmas story called the Magnificat (Luke 1:47-65). It's the section in which Mary praises God after learning that she will be the mother of Jesus. She's portrayed as saying that God has brought down the powerful, lifted up the lowly, and sent the rich away empty. Many of us who are financially secure and who have power of any kind don't want to believe that God operates like that, so we tend to ignore that scripture.

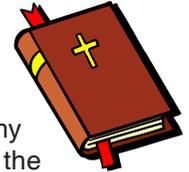
## Radical statements throughout the Bible

Not long before I reread the Magnificat, presidential candidate Obama's statement about our needing to spread the wealth was in the news. It enraged many people, especially many who say they're Christians. I find that odd, because not only part of the Magnificat but also many statements attributed to Jesus in the gospels seem to advocate spreading the wealth in some way. So do many statements that, according to the Old Testament, the Hebrew prophets believed came from God.



One Christian friend of mine gets around the apparent radicality of such statements by saying that the Bible is not a book about economics, just as it isn't a book about science, and in some ways I agree with that. Much of the Bible is expressed in meta-

## Scriptures we choose to ignore



Most of us Americans are wealthy compared to most other people in the world, and many scriptures that we tend to ignore are about wealth. If we're financially secure, and especially if our income provides us with luxuries as well as necessities, the many scriptures that are critical of rich people are likely to make us uncomfortable. We're therefore likely to ignore them.

But another group of scriptures that also get ignored by many Christians are those that relate to sexual behavior. Many Christians cite scriptures to support their belief that the only legitimate marriage is between one man and one woman, yet the Bible says little about this, and it's loaded with passages about leaders who had many wives. Many Christians also use scriptures to claim that it's better to be married than single, yet Jesus apparently was single.

## Jesus's teaching matters most

Also, Christian opponents of homosexuality cite Old Testament scriptures to support their view, but those scriptures are far outnumbered by nearby scripture passages that these Christians ignore. They ignore verses that forbid practices they evidently prefer not to obey, such as sowing two kinds of seed in the same field and wearing garments made of two different materials.



The Christians who cite New Testament scriptures as evidence that homosexual people shouldn't be clergy avoid others from the same context, too. I've never heard these Christians insist that greed, envy, boastfulness, or foolishness should keep anyone from being clergy, yet those behaviors are condemned in the same few New Testament scriptures that Christians use for denouncing homosexuality.



Quoting scripture to show what being Christian requires is unconvincing if what we quote contradicts the core of Jesus's teaching: God is one; love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; love your neighbor as yourself.



phorical language that apparently was never meant to be taken literally. Also, much of the Bible clearly applies only to the setting in which it was written. It doesn't fit today's global economic scene, just as it doesn't reflect what has now been discovered through science.

However, these explanations don't let us off the hook with regard to applying the principles that appear throughout the Bible, about treating people with compassion and justice. Unlike rules and commands that pertain only to the ancient cultures from which they arose, the biblical principles of compassion and justice apply to today's world just as to yesterday's. We're responsible for applying them in our setting, and many of them are about economic issues.

### The ideal world isn't here yet

Another way in which many Christians seem to avoid feeling the need to apply the Bible's instructions about economic issues is by acknowledging that we need to share our wealth but saying we should be free to do it voluntarily rather than have the government force us to do it.



Relying on voluntary sharing might be adequate if we were living in the ideal world and everyone in it was a perfect Christian. In the situation that the Lord's Prayer describes as God's kingdom having come on earth, everyone with money to spare would presumably be actively and personally feeding the hungry, taking care of the sick, and so on. But since that ideal world hasn't yet arrived, we apparently need to meet these needs in other ways. We need to



compensate somehow for the fact that in the present non-ideal world, individual Christians aren't getting all the hungry fed or all the sick taken care of.

We also need to take into account the fact that much of today's medical care requires money and facilities far beyond what individuals can furnish. MRIs and chemotherapy go far beyond what the good Samaritan could have provided to care for the injured man on the road to Jericho.



Also, in today's world some of the needs Jesus instructed his followers to meet relate to ways in which governments, international corporations, and other giant bureaucratic institutions now function. These institutions are so large and so interconnected, and their effects are so all-pervasive, that we can influence them only by working to change the systems they're part of. So it may be necessary now for Christians to work toward getting their governments to do some of what in earlier times could be done by Christians individually.



### Inconsistent Christians

Many Christians, however, still don't want government to care for the sick and the poor. I find that odd, because the Christians who most vehemently claim that they don't want government interference in these functions welcome its interference of other kinds. They want government to interfere in the most intimate, personal aspects of life by controlling abortion and marriage, for example. Many of these same Christians also expect major government aid if they're struck by hurricanes, floods, or other such disasters. Those attitudes toward government seem inconsistent to me.



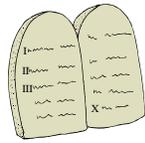
It seems odd, too, that so many conservative Christians say that the U.S. founders were Christian (which many actually were not) and that the U.S. is a Christian nation (which it isn't), yet these Christians don't want the U.S. to do the things Jesus apparently told his followers to do. Holding both of those positions simultaneously requires being very selective about which parts of the Bible to obey. And ironically, the Christians who take these inconsistent positions, obeying a few selected scriptures but ignoring many topics to which Jesus gave much greater emphasis, are the Christians who so often criticize more liberal or progressive Christians for picking and choosing what parts of the Bible to believe.



### How do we choose?

Whether we're conservative or progressive, however, personal comfort seems to be the basis on which many of us decide how to interpret biblical instructions and choose which ones to follow. I'm

perfectly willing to obey “Honor your father and mother,” for example. My parents are no longer living, and I feel that mostly I treated them well, so this commandment doesn’t make me uncomfortable, therefore I don’t feel any need to ignore it.



But what if this commandment’s meaning is broader? What if it is about how societies treat their elderly people—their “fathers and mothers”? What if it applies to how we treat our elderly citizens who can’t afford medical treatment? I’d rather not think about needing to be responsible for that, so I try to avoid interpreting that scripture in that way.

### It’s hard when it applies to us

Our choice of which parts of the Bible to pay attention to usually depends a lot, too, on which parts seem to apply personally to us. It’s easy enough to read about God toppling other people from their pedestals, but when a scripture says we’re not entitled to stay on ours, we don’t want to believe it.

**[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.**  
—Luke 1: 52-53

What about the part of the Magnificat about God’s having “lifted up the lowly,” for example? I assume Mary was lowly mainly in the sense of being a nobody, a peasant. But since I’m not a peasant, I’m uneasy about seeing God portrayed as lifting up peasants. Could that mean God supports radical activities like peasant uprisings? I hope not, because that could harm non-peasants like me. So I prefer to ignore the part of the Magnificat about God lifting up the lowly.

What about filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty? I’m glad to give some canned food or a turkey when there’s a community or church food drive. I’m even willing to make fairly generous financial gifts for such purposes.



But I’m certainly not willing to give so much that I’m left empty! And surely God wouldn’t expect me to do anything so unreasonable. After all, whatever “riches” I have come entirely from legal means, so there’s surely no reason for me to have to give them up. So I choose to ignore the possibility of my being sent away empty.

But what if God’s kind of justice actually requires those of us who are richer than many others of the world’s people to do without a lot of the luxuries we now treat as necessities—to become a lot emptier than we now are? And what if “thrones” is a metaphor for all sources of imperial, top-down power? Jesus actively opposed those, and apparently we need to, too, as his followers. What if “the lowly” are all people who are being



treated unjustly, and those who don’t have enough of life’s necessities? If that’s what this scripture is about, as I suspect it is, ignoring it is a big mistake—possibly a sin, in biblical terms.



### Taboo for us but not for Jesus

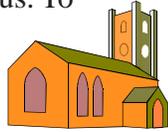
There are plenty of other statements in the Bible, including many attributed to Jesus, that confront us with questions so uncomfortable that we ignore them. A high proportion of those relate to economic issues. Many others speak about how governments and rulers function and how we sometimes should refuse to support them.

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com). To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 16 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Many of today's Christians consider such topics unmentionable in church. Yet these topics had high priority—maybe top priority—for Jesus. To me, that means we need to give them high priority too, and we need to be talking about them in church.



### **An important time for asking questions**

Whether we consider ourselves conservative, liberal, or progressive, and whether we voted for the incoming U.S. President or not, this time in which the new U.S. administration is taking office is an especially important time for Christians to think

more seriously about the economic-justice issues raised throughout the Bible. We need to keep asking whether proposed government policies show the kind of compassion that Jesus taught. Will they help to heal the sick and feed the hungry? Will the policies help all people to have enough of life's basic needs? Will they lessen injustice?

Whether the policies are labeled Christian or not doesn't matter. In fact, sometimes religious labels needlessly drive potential supporters away. What matters is whether the proposed policies will promote Christlike compassion and justice.

*Barbara*



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## **Reading the Bible selectively**

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